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Grandeur – it's Only Natural

The question of what the grandeur of God really is has never been easy to answer. Gerard Manley Hopkins, having authored a poem with the title "God's Grandeur," should successfully clarify the answer for us. However, the vision he creates merely incites the the issue with ambiguity and complexity. Elizabeth Villeponteaux points out, "The apparently straightforward statement that opens Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'God's Grandeur' reveals, like much of the sonnet's remainder, clear meaning in an instant, and then further insight over time. However, the images that succeed that statement have long generated noisy confusion" (201). So, we may believe we have a full grasp on the poem at first, but further assessment will reveal hidden complications. Words never mean just one thing. They can seldom be chained to one simple definition. And they can often operate independently of the speaker's intentions – something that often crops up in everyday conversation. For the sake of this example, take two adults. One is named Keith and the other Amy. Keith may say to Amy, "Wow, you look thin!" Realistically, Amy would accept that as a compliment, which is probably what Keith intended. However, if Amy went to the Oxford English Dictionary, she would discover that a departure from the common meaning of "thin" is to be of a liquid or pasty substance or deficient in substance or quality. To this, Amy could very well take offense. Similarly, poetry is ambiguous and it can be unclear whether it was the poet's intention, the speaker's intention, or the reader's interpretation that makes something so. Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "God's Grandeur" is seemingly a poem praising the presence of God, and condemning man for destruction of and disconnection with nature; this is true to an extent, but various clues in the poem create a tension detrimental to the underlying message of the poem. The question, then, remains: do these disparate images seem intended, do they append or diminish the message of the poem, or are they simply a product of over-analyzation? None of these need to be exclusively true, nor do they need to be completely falsified. On the one hand, we cannot simply say that a poet with such careful attention to words simply overlooked the lesser known/used denotations of the words in the poem. "God's Grandeur" ultimately presents to us two distinct Gods; this, I believe, is why he chose the ambivalent images of the quatrain – to create an impersonal God, which perhaps is what the commonplace man might behold, and then replace that God with a clearer vision of the nurturing, permeating Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect, or crux, of the poem is the distinction between "the grandeur of God" and the "Holy Ghost." Slakey says of the two modes through which God is manifested : "If the world 'is charged,' . . . with God's grandeur, various manifestations of

it turn up continuously. These are grouped in two ways, first as they are either instantaneous or gradual – flaming out or a gathering to a greatness – then, by comparison of the octave with sestet, as they are either indirect or direct" ("Impersoning" 160). Slakey makes the case that God is seen at first indirectly, through his grandeur:

> We have no personal relation with him. He remains distant. Various details reinforce this impression of distance. The passive verb 'is charged' implies that the world is acted upon, as by something apart from it. The several meanings of the phrase – burdened, liable for, commissioned, electrified – all reveal that the grandeur itself is distinct from the world . . . ("Grandeur"77).

Here Slakey points to evidence that there is a distinctness about the "grandeur of God" in the way that it seems neither personal nor redemptive. With that in mind, did Hopkins intend to create the vision of a God that incites fear and servitude? Probably not. It seems to me that Hopkins merely wanted to create the distinction to increase the effect of the Holy Ghost in the sestet. Slakey seems to think that the change is a product of what he calls "divine adaptability," which means that in man's time of need, God evolves to a living creature to work personally with him ("Grandeur" 163). Personally, I agree with Slakey about the manner of God's distance; however, I believe that God doesn't change or adapt in the poem – only the *perception* changes. We know this because of the embracing structure of the poem in which divine action both opens and closes the poem, encompassing the human action and because of the modes in which he is presented – in simile, then metaphor. And, that even the reason that the God of the first quatrain is so distant is because of all of the action that man does to him. Here, God and nature are not exactly synonymous, but still interwoven. So man's actions ("crushed," "trod," "seared," "bleared," "smeared," "smudge") are done unto nature and God as well. But, because God is forgiving, he embraces the earth like a mother. On that note, critics have commented on the embracing nature of the structure of the poem itself. Slakey notes that, "the human activity, described in the second quatrain, occurs within a divine embrace, the divine activity of the first quatrain and that of the sestet. So, too, the first and last lines mention the divine" ("Impersoning" 84). So, it is safe to say that Hopkins is trying to say that God is always the same, always embracing man; but the perception of him changes during the course of the poem.

The title itself sounds a little peculiar at first because we are used to saying words like "God's Grace" or "God's Glory" together. It seems as though Hopkins is going one step above by using "grandeur" instead of those other 'g' words. He is elevating the intensity of the presence of God, and it is an excellent word choice because of all the implications it includes, good and bad. Grandeur is synonymous with haughtiness or arrogance as well as greatness and magnificence. It tends to imply an intimidating or elitist quality, like how one views a monarch. True, it is the consensus that God is superior and smites the wicked, but those certainly aren't ideal traits. Also, "grandeur" refers to the image of God, rather than the thing itself – just like the similes of the subsequent lines do. That is, what is being discussed in the first quatrain is man's projection of God, for that is what he sees – "shining," "oil," "rod." Likewise, the metaphor of line thirteen in the "Holy Ghost." Ghosts are transparent, therefore invisible – not seen by man.

Man is the true villain of the poem, however. The speaker accuses man of

disconnecting from, usurping, and destroying the land when he says, "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod" (5). Phonetically this invokes the sense of walking or marching. "Generations" and the repetition in this line also suggest a circular movement and deep destruction. If generations have tread over the same areas, then the wound of the earth should be deep. The speaker continues to speak of the besmirching of the planet with the lines, "And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/ And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell" (6-7). It seems here that the word choice "sear" is meant negatively. But, "sear" is also the closing of a wound, which would make it seem that the speaker is saying that man is reversing the destruction done by treading. This, however, does not make sense in the context of the poem, therefore it only contributes to subversion of the poem's fundamental message. "Smeared" echoes the image of oil earlier in the poem because it can also mean anointed. The grandeur of God is described as being like an oil, so by inserting "smeared," the speaker creates yet another detrimental connection of God to something negative.

There too is a juxtaposition of God with electricity. Electricity is harnessed and used by man, so why would the speaker be using it to describe the grandeur of God? One answer to this is that the human mind – in Hopkins's time – is becoming too occupied with science and technology, therefore becoming less focused on God and religion. Hopkins could be saying, "Hey! How do you think electricity exists? God, of course!" The speaker says, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (1). So, the world is essentially electrified with God's grandeur; he makes it go round. But, once again Hopkins has chosen a word with discordant implications. "Charged" is synonymous with "burdened" or "punished." Immediately after the reader has read the title and quite possibly interpreted it negatively, another negative notion is presented. It seems that Hopkins believes that the impression man has of God in the octave is false.

Later in the poem, the speaker asks, "Why do men then not now reck his rod?" (4). "Reck" essentially means to take notice of and obey, but it can mean to do so in a state of alarm, distress, or in a troubled manner. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has this to say of the word: "From its earliest appearance in English, the verb is almost exclusively employed in negative or interrogative clauses" (OED). So, to "reck" is something more than acknowledge or respect – it essentially is to fear. Then there is the rod, which may invoke the image of the Shepherd's staff, leading the sheep (which may seem innocent enough, but is insulting to humans,) or merely a symbol of power. Or, a more sinister symbol of power, the phallus. Notice that God's rod is referred to as "his" here, and also not as "His" – the only time gender is explicitly mentioned in the poem. Also, by saying "his rod," the speaker is suggesting that men are recking another rod – the lightning rod. Ultimately fitting in with the theme of electricity in the poem, "rod" refers also to this conductor of electricity. The speaker is equating God's grandeur with electricity again, and by choosing a word with several meanings and implications, he is subverting the surface image.

The images of the foil and the oil in the second and third lines are complex, perhaps even more so than the aforementioned: "Hopkins explained to Robert Bridges, his friend and correspondent, that the foil image was central, the poem written to expand upon it" (Villeponteaux 201). This certainly makes the foil image seem to be the most important and possibly most complex of the poem. The second line begins, "It [grandeur] will flame out. .

." (Hopkins). "Flame out" suggests violence. It also is peculiar to associate with God, as it invokes images of hellfire and brimstone. The line continues with, "like shining from shook foil." Literally, the speaker is saying that God can be seen in brilliant glimpses like when you shake a piece of foil in the sun. This seems almost obnoxious, as the light of the sun bouncing off of something shiny can hurt one's eyes. Or it would have the disorienting effect that a strobe light does. The most probable reason Hopkins chose foil instead of any other shiny material is because it is a conductor of electricity and can be interpreted doubly as natural foliage such as leaves or flowers. Perhaps it foreshadows the linkage of God and nature in the sestet. "The dearest freshness deep down things" (10) is probably God or his power. So, God is responsible for the renewal of nature and the undoing of human destruction. If we observe the foil as the most complex image of the poem, we should dig deeper into its literal meaning. Interestingly, "foil" also refers to a thin layer of metal placed under a gem to improve its color or brilliancy. So, if the speaker is saying that God's grandeur is reflected in the foil, then isn't he saying that the shining coming off the foil is better than the actual thing itself? Even though the foil can represent some very positive imagery about God, the complexity of it causes us to question him. Or rather, in this case – I believe – the impression man has of him.

The next line is also used to describe the grandeur of God, only it seems contradictory to the previous. The speaker says that "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil/ Crushed" (3-4). The previous line describes the grandeur as something quick, glancing, and flashing (even flashy) and the image of the oil is a slow, spreading, even smothering one. To begin, "ooze" is not a very pleasant sounding word and predictably has all sorts of nuances. As a noun, it can mean juice or sap from a plant or a fruit. This echoes the image of the foil because it suggests a natural and vegetative quality as well. However, it can also mean mud or slime. And as a verb, it means basically to give a strong impression of, display a facade, or to say in unctuous (unction means oil or to anoint with oil) or sneering way (OED). This gives reinforcement to the notion that the grandeur is of a deceptive or ambiguous manner. Villeponteaux tells us that, "He [Hopkins] has not left us with explanations for the oozing oil, but we do know that an earlier version of the poem uses the word 'pressed' instead of 'crushed,' both the original choice and the candidate ultimately selected are, once again, instructive" (202). To me, it seems that by changing the word from a simple, gentle image (i.e. the pressing of lips) to "crushed," Hopkins intended to insert a violent image into the poem. To Villeponteaux, it invokes an image of the Crucifixion: "Hopkins no doubt first used the word 'pressed' because that is what we usually call the pressure applied to extract olive oil; yet he changed it to 'crushed,' thus invoking a sense of violence that could better forge a parallel to the body of Christ" (204). Gertrude White sees the Crucifixion in the poem as well, only in a different section. She points to a line in the sestet, saying, "'Black' is a word too strong to describe any natural sunset. 'The last lights off the black West' invites us, surely, to remember the darkness that covered 'the whole land until the ninth hour' (Mark xv.33) at the Crucifixion" (286). White says of the crushed oil:

> The olives are crushed for their oil: the oil of man's nourishment, the oil of anointment and consecration. And Christ was literally crushed at Gethsemane and on the cross for the sins of men. And so the Holy Ghost, the "grandeur"

> of God, flames and shines in a world bought by the suffering, the "crushing" of Christ, a world forever redeemed by God from what man's sin had made of it. (286)

Villeponteaux and White make very valid observations here, as I do believe the grandeur is what is being crushed, not doing the crushing ("like oil / Crushed"). This would reinforce the assumption that the oil image is linked to but contrasted with the "shining like shook foil," because in line two the grandeur is doing the action and in line 3-4 it is being acted upon. Here, I believe, is a good location to point out that the poem is a kind of push and tug between man and God – not necessarily line by line, but in a more general sense. First the grandeur "flames out," then the oil is crushed (assuming we follow the interpretations of White and Villeponteaux) as well as the soil itself by man, then nature revives itself, then "the last lights off the black West went" (11) (think of what White says about the night of the Crucifixion), before finally the Holy Ghost prevails over all with humbleness, not pride. If we observe the oil in the same terms as we observe the shining, however, it complies with the charged and foiled images. The oil being referred to may well be anointing oil, which indicates that not only is the world being "charged" by and getting blinded by God's grandeur, it is being forcefully oppressed by religion. The poem is not specific about what the oil is "crushed" between. If it is, indeed, anointing oil, then it would be crushed between the thumb of the clergy and the forehead of the anointed. The image of crushing is brutal and oppressive, like it was forced. Perhaps this is a comment on the confined and and commanding nature of modern Christianity – which only reinforces the belief that the poem condemns man's perception, because religion is the human attempt to understand God, and ultimately use him to control people.

The sestet of an Italian sonnet normally presents a shift of tone and argument. This is true for "God's Grandeur." While the octave is largely about man's squandering and destruction of nature and the subversive idea of God's grandeur, the sestet is predominantly a redemption of God and nature. By saying, "And though the lights off the black west went," (11) the speaker is creating a momentary depression of the mood only to complete the couplet with, "Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs – " (12). The contrast of black and brown is significant here. Black is hopeless and disorienting, while brown is a warm, neutral, and natural color – the color of earth. "Springs" also invokes all sorts of positive images. Youth, energy, renewal, love, and warmth are just a few.

Despite the destructive manner and the fusion of modern science and faith presented in the first eight lines, the opening line of the sestet changes the tone of the poem: "And for all this, nature is never spent" (9). One would expect the opening word to be "but," *but* Slakey says, "the 'And' introducing the sestet, would mean that the Holy Ghost has not come in opposition to what men are doing, though he would lead them to a new life, but as in some way its corollary; men destroy and God renews" (162).

After saying, "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" (10) and then describing the renewal of day with the rotation of the earth, Hopkins's speaker credits these rebirth phenomena to the Holy Ghost: "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ world broods. . . " (13-14). No longer is the smiting, solid-sounding God showing himself in the world, but a nurturing spirit. This seems the appropriate way to imagine the idea of God, rather than a masculine, overbearing deity. The speaker puts the Holy Ghost in the image of

the hen (thus changing the gender of God), saying she "broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings" (14). "Brood" is sometimes thought to sulk or to contemplate deeply, but here it means to incubate or to warm under the wings. The wings also suggest an angelic quality, merging the nature and religion again, but in a metaphor rather than a smile – suggesting directness rather than indirectness.

Upon a first reading, or even subsequent readings, "God's Grandeur" is seemingly a poem praising God, rejecting man, and praising God again for the ability to renew nature. This is mostly true; however, the complexities of the images here flesh out for us after a while, and we see a dark, subversive undertone maybe start to take form, at least in the first quatrain. Upon further thought and inspection, though, it becomes more apparent that the subliminal meanings only append Hopkins's original message of criticism towards man's projection of God, perhaps oppressiveness of church, and man's inability to connect with nature ("the soil / Is now bare, nor foot can feel, being shod" (Hopkins 7-8) while promoting the embracing manner of God and the worship of nature's ability to renew itself, an ability indebted to the ethereal figure of the Holy Ghost.

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